

Public onside with Rae report

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How will the public react to the Rae report on post-secondary education? Results from the OISE/UT surveys of educational issues, conducted every two years in Ontario since 1980, strongly suggest the report will be well received.

Most should applaud Rae's call for legislating universal access to post-secondary education for all qualified students regardless of means. As early as 1992, we found a majority (58 per cent) agreed there should be a college place for all qualified students, even if it meant spending more tax money on the college system. It took until the late 1990s for opinion to reach the same point for university education. But in 2002, when we last asked, 64 per cent agreed that a place in university should be guaranteed to all qualified students, even at the cost of higher spending.

Support for higher spending on university and college education remains at historic highs. In the just-published 2004 OISE/UT survey, 70 per cent favoured greater spending on universities and 67 per cent on colleges. As late as 1996, less than half favoured higher spending on either institution. More convincing, perhaps, willingness to pay higher taxes for education has been inching up over the past 10 years. In 2004, 57 per cent were prepared to pay higher taxes to support education.

While the public is willing to spend more tax dollars on colleges and universities, basic elements of the Rae report's position on tuition should also find widespread acceptance.

In recent years, a majority of the public has consistently signalled that students will have to bear a share of the growing costs of post-secondary education. In 2004, 51 per cent thought costs of expanding university staff and facilities should be borne equally by increased government grants and higher tuition fees. In addition, a tiny minority (4 per cent) wanted tuition to bear the full cost. But the view is growing that tuition is high enough and government grants should fund further increases in funding. In 2004, 43 per cent took this position, compared to 34 per cent in 1998. Moreover, in the past the public has been cautious about deregulation of fees. In 1996, only a narrow majority (53 per cent) favoured deregulation of tuition fees in professional programs like medicine, dentistry, business and law, even when reminded that graduates would likely earn more than others.

While only a minority would shelter or freeze tuition fees from the increasing cost of post-secondary education, there is widespread agreement with the Rae report that the barriers to low-income students must be addressed.

The public has long recognized that students from low-income families have less chance of attending college or university than their wealthier peers. Two-thirds held this view in 2004, but we found the same result as early as 1996.

In 1996, 64 per cent thought raising tuition fees by half (*a fait accompli* by 2002, according to Statistics Canada) would prevent low-income students from attending university, and an overwhelming 85 per cent favoured more financial aid to poorer students.

The "Australian" model of linking repayment of student loans to income after graduation was also extremely popular in 1996 — 88 per cent liked the idea, another point of agreement with the Rae report. While there is dispute about some income contingent loan plans, grants to low-income students is an idea whose time has come.

However, in one area the Rae report is out of step with public views. While Bob Rae may have been inspired on access issues by his encounter with aboriginal students, in 2004 only a minority of the public (40 per cent)

thought aboriginals had a worse chance of getting a post-secondary education than white students — 12 per cent thought they had a better chance.

More generally, there is a reluctance to acknowledge educational disadvantage apart from low-income status. In 2004, only 21 per cent thought black students were disadvantaged in gaining access to college or university; only 37 per cent thought students with physical disabilities faced greater barriers than others.

The general "outreach" to disadvantaged groups called for by the Rae report is unlikely to find immediate widespread enthusiasm. In 2000, the OISE/UT survey asked what the government should do if some social groups were under-represented in post-secondary education: 39 per cent said the government should try to achieve a more equal result, but 52 per cent thought governments should leave it to the individual efforts of those in the groups affected. While the barriers for aboriginals, blacks, disabled people and others remain real, outreach efforts may still evoke uninformed concerns about reverse discrimination.

On balance, the Rae report should find broad public support for the goals of increasing investment in colleges and universities, and in promoting access where barriers are financial. But there is still much educational work to do to convince much of the public that not all barriers to post-secondary education are strictly financial.